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# Monstrous spectacle

by Greg Thomas • 27.10.2021

The exhibition *The Ultimate Kiss* at MOSTYN, Llandudno, shows the dizzying creative remit of Jacqueline de Jong (b.1939), an artist often reduced to her early Situationist persona.<sup>1</sup> However, in an interview with Alison M. Gingeras in the catalogue, the artist reveals a perhaps surprising central tenet of her shapeshifting practice: 'Again I return to the question of hideous circumstances of our collective human condition, the invisible of society: the homeless, the migrants. For me the archetypal themes in our culture persist and become urgent, such as the Wandering Jew, the question of diaspora and human migration' (p.196).<sup>2</sup>

To understand this further, it is worth piecing together some fragments of De Jong's creative biography, the meandering course of which belies her 'Situationist woman' label but might also make it hard to spot any consistent ethical or political motivation. In many ways, the story starts in the second room of the exhibition, with a set of messy, grotesque oil paintings from the early 1960s **FIG. 1**. These works were created during De Jong's time in Paris (1959–70) while she was in a creative-romantic relationship with the painter and sculptor Asger Jorn, and they certainly emulate Jorn's spirit; according to Xander Karskens, De Jong 'always admitted' that the artist was a great influence on her earliest experiments (p.101). But the primal force of these pieces also speaks to the second-generation expressionism of action painting and Tachisme, while the figurative elements and strange roster of characters seem to draw on Surrealist myths and archetypes.

*La Guardia Pisse Pendant La Collision* **FIG. 2**, part of the *Accidental Painting* series, is typical in its lurid colour scheme and chaotic, spiralling arrangement (loosely reminiscent of some of Max Beckmann's compositions). Equally characteristic of the series is the way this work transplants scenes of contemporary life – in particular imagery of sex and violence – into a strange fantasy world of primeval beasts, whose appearance sits somewhere between dragons and lizards. At the centre of the arrangement a pink limb grasps the titular 'pissing' phallus – De Jong's early work is replete with bulbous breasts and genitals – while multi-coloured anthropoid monsters trample over wrecked cars. What all this has to do with Situationism is an open question. Perhaps retreating to an imaginative realm of mutant creatures allows the artist to mimic and critique the 'spectacularisation' of modern tragedy?

The third room marks De Jong's turn to a particular variant of

Pop art, one that, to borrow Annabelle Ténèze's phrase, exhibits none of Warhol's 'cold indifference' (p.34). This is Pop with a Breughel-esque, teeming quality, and an emphasis on distorted bodies that suggests an intense emotional investment in its subject. This phase also marks a more decisive embrace of narrative sequence and figurative representation, traits that have defined De Jong's work across the following five decades. Scenes from pop culture are rendered with the sinister, carnivalesque spirit of James Ensor's masked balls, notably in *Privat property of a space-technician* (1966), which mingles images of the space race with a chaotic morass of dancing, dining and kissing bodies.

There are objects here too, brightly painted and patterned scrunches of Perspex, resembling Nouveau Réalisme junk sculptures. Indeed, this movement, and the contemporary French school of Narrative Figuration, might seem more natural bedfellows for De Jong's late-1960s work than North American Pop. However, Ténèze notes that De Jong's independent streak kept her and those schools 'mutually at a distance'. Then there are the 'erotic paintings'. *Grietjes ontstoken tandvlees* **FIG. 3**, for example, includes a gruesomely textured nose among its tangle of blotched flesh. For Ténèze, these works indicate the co-extensive nature of sexual and political liberation for women artists of De Jong's generation, the 'claiming of rights [. . .] through a primal life force, an energy expressed in the shock value of raw, feminine eroticism' (p.35).

All this is to say nothing of the typographical experiments that defined De Jong's decade in Paris, a generous sample of which throngs the first gallery **FIG. 4**. She was editor of *The Situationist Times* (1962–67), ironically launched after Guy Debord expelled her from his group. Neo-Dada typography and the liberated movement of words and images gives shape to the restless, questing motion of countercultural thought. Pages and ephemera placed in a central vitrine are surrounded by examples of the artist's printing work, an ongoing accompaniment to her painting. These include linocut posters such as *LA RÉFORME LA SOCIÉTÉ ÉTUDIANTS Participez au Mouvement à l'UNEF* created in 1968 for the protests during the Atelier Populaire's occupation of the lithography studio at the École des Beaux-Arts, Paris.

In the early 1970s De Jong returned to her native Netherlands, where she pursued a more solitary furrow, following the unifying cultural paradigms of the 1960s. Sequential drawings and diptychs, such as the *Chronique d'Amsterdam* series (1971–73) **FIG. 5**, incorporate the written word into a diary-like interrogation of contemporary life as interpolated through capitalism's endless manufacture of imagery and slogans. Later in the decade and across the early 1980s came the *Billiards* sequence and an eccentric set of works depicting scenes from detective novels. At this point a skewed, post-Cubist realism seems to hold sway:

dramatic or pivotal events are picked out using a mixture of flattened and receding picture planes. Much is made of the bawdy subtexts of the billiard board with its racks, strokes and balls, the latter always presented in triangular arrangements, like some ancient fertility symbol.

Since the late 1980s De Jong has been drawn back to the figurative distortion and monstrous cast of her previous paintings. Violent, erotic, bawdy scenes featuring human and reptilian subjects appear in landscape works such as *Chemin Perdu de la Chasse Frustrée* FIG. 6, and in the *Upstairs-Downstairs* series commissioned by Amsterdam Town Hall in the mid-1980s, to which the sixth and final gallery space is dedicated FIG. 7. Typically, a free and adventurous intertextuality is suggested across this late period, not least evoking Francis Bacon's translucent flesh-scapes. The artist has also spoken of the influence of Goya in her more recent works. Overall, this exhibition does not tell the story of a Situationist apparatchik. However, it is perhaps one animated by the motion of *détournement*, a continuous, self-alienating movement through multiple creative genres, mocking and sending up each one as it is left behind. If any qualities or ideas tie it all together beyond that, one would have to alight on an overarching spirit of creative destruction, at once sexually charged, abjectly comic and alert to the reality and impact of violence on the social plane, particularly of state-sanctioned brutality.

In that sense, one of the most important works in the exhibition – circling back to the artist's opening note of moral anger – is the most recent. *Tureluurs* FIG. 8 is from De Jong's *Border-Line* series, which explores the current refugee crisis, in particular the liminal, purgatorial states in which its subjects are kept. It is impossible not to read this abstract yet vividly grim scene of chained, boxed and bleeding bodies of the recent Donald Trump administration, alluded to by the artist in interview: 'Borders are everywhere as an obstacle, [including] "The Wall" between Mexico and the US [. . .] "Borders" are to be overruled and destroyed to escape from the most horrible and cruel inhuman conditions' (p.196). As Karskens also notes, the *Border-Line* series represents 'an artistic gesture of sincere engagement and compassion – even though the artist herself is principally uninterested in the expression of moral positions' (p.101). It is this push and pull between social engagement and disengagement, between realism and fantasy, the human and the monstrous, and tragedy and comedy, which gives De Jong's practice its arresting energy.

**Exhibition details** Jacqueline de Jong: The Ultimate Kiss  
MOSTYN, Llandudno  
9th October–6th February 2022

## Footnotes

- 1** Catalogue: *Jacqueline de Jong: Ultimate Kiss*. By Devrim Bayar *et al.* 224 pp. incl. 150 col. + b. & w. ills. (Mercatorfonds, Brussels, 2021), £35. ISBN 978-0-300-25770-0.
- 2** A Jewish artist, De Jong was spirited out of Nazi-occupied Netherlands by her mother during the Second World War.

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